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My Master Victor Hammer*

Harry Duncan

Long ago, in 1949, Frederick B. Adams, Jr., asked me to write for *The New Colophon* about the book printing that my colleagues and I had been doing at Cumington, Massachusetts. The article I submitted contains the following passage:

Our friend Mr. Victor Hammer more than anyone else has helped us with the troubling technicalities—and perhaps, as Mr. Will Ransom has remarked, “the interesting things in printing are all technical.” For Mr. Hammer has not only been lavishly generous to share his extensive, practical discoveries and recoveries with us, but is the only printer we know who is also devoted to that laborious, “inadequate mechanism,” the hand press. Through his good offices, we printed one book at the Wells College Press; and we have wished that we might work with him in closer collaboration. All arrangements to this end have so far fallen through, however, perhaps for the sufficient reason that such a collaboration would be too one-sided, we having so much more to receive from it than we could possibly return. His superb craftsmanship and manifold typographic achievements we cannot aspire to emulate: he has actually cut the punches for a new type, had it cast, and only *then* looked about for something to print in it—while we are without any typographic form whatever until we have copy that engages our attention.

At least some of the invidious condescension and nettled impertinence that skulk behind this panegyric must have been conscious. Some time before, my partner Paul Wightman Williams and I had, while enjoying Victor’s hospitality at Aurora-on-Cayuga, New York, been smitten with his array of punchcutting tools as well as awestruck by his skill using them; covertly, we had conceived a vainglorious project, to cut a roman type based on eighteenth-century New England gravestone inscription, and in pursuit of that

proposed ourselves as apprentices to Victor—a boon which he had not, as it seemed to me, embraced with suitable zeal. My overweening pretension was too vulnerable to admit that we greenhorns, just starting to grasp the elementary problems of presswork, may not have seemed to him quite ready yet for so demanding a new discipline—let alone that he might have for the next few years some project of his own to realize, which the presence of a clumsy neophyte like me could hardly expedite.

But aside from my pique as a suitor who feared rejection and my furtive attempt to plead the suit once again, I can now make out a general shortsightedness that misrepresents Victor's mastership even more grossly. This myopia betrays itself through the context I put the citation into. Striving to give some coherence to my account of our happenstances at Cummington, I strung them on a common theme, a recurrent complaint about a predicament described thus on the second page:

Hand printing, being a craft, presents difficulties different from those of the fine arts, different even more from those of discussion and research. Its principle is simple enough—merely to press paper evenly against type set and inked; and its tools and gear involve nothing more complex than the inclined plane or the toggle joint. But in practice its success depends upon innumerable rules of thumb, knacks acquired only through experience, when they become almost unthinking responses. Such experience was once handed down most efficiently from master to apprentice. But we, attempting to control the process with the inexperienced and Olympian intellect, had our trials and, inexorably, our errors for instructors. And we came to feel the actual process as the Shadow falling between idea and reality, a baffling ordeal to show up our incompetence and humble our pride.

And on the page immediately following my acknowledgment of Victor's succor, the article concluded with this lamentation:

To say that we have been apprenticed at all is only a manner of speaking. T.S. Eliot makes this observation: "The apprentice (ideally, at least) did not merely serve his master, and did not merely learn from him as one would learn at a technical school—he became assimilated into a way of life

which went with that particular trade or craft; and perhaps the lost secret of the craft is this, that not merely a skill but an entire way of life was transmitted." I do not know an equivalent for that kind of training. Mr. Eliot also observes, however, that "if we lose anything finally and irreparably, we must make do without it"; and perhaps the amateur status has certain compensations. So far we have been granted the time and place to work at our transgressions. Probably that, together with incentive texts, is the most that any printer today can hope for.

The theme is not entirely untrue, no matter how my statement of it may have been colored by a wish to make our attempt seem the more heroic by stressing the tribulations we suffered. But at the time I was still too close to those unresolved difficulties to see that we were not really dispossessed after all, but on the contrary had received our full inheritance, and in such abundance that a lifetime would not be long enough to overcome the limitations of our capacity to enjoy it. Furthermore, it had been handed on in a form highly serviceable to us, more congenial surely than any imaginable indenture to a nineteenth- or even an eighteenth-century printing office. And the chief executor of this bequest, which amounted to nothing less than our portion of what is vital in the abounding tradition of typographic virtue, was Victor Hammer. He accomplished this prodigious transference with remarkable dispatch, in only two brief years which were swarming with myriad distractions and perturbations and during which we saw him on only four occasions, three of them mere visits that lasted no more than a few constricted hours.

One unseasonably mild afternoon in sugaring time, early March 1946, a stranger had knocked on our door and introduced himself as an official of Wells College, a liberal arts school for women at Aurora-on-Cayuga. The purpose of his call was twofold, to tell us about Victor's work as head of its art department and director of its small publishing press and to find out what we at Cummington were up to. There could be little doubt who had prompted his mission, and his manner of discharging it revealed what high regard he had for the attainments and interests of his commissioner. You see, this happened long ago when hand printing was still an anomaly, in academic circles as well as everywhere else here, and any recognition on his part of its possible validity could not have

come from precept or precedent, only from his personal valuation of the practitioner of it whom he knew. (He failed to mention one factor that gave urgency to his errand: Victor was nearing the mandatory retirement age of the college.) The report he delivered back cannot have been wholly unfavorable, for a few days later Victor sent us a fascicle of magnificent printing, together with a note that read: "Will you accept in turn for the moral support you gave my cause some of my own work. You realize how kindred our spirits are, and I also wonder how I managed to survive. After all it is the spirit which makes matter alive. What we need is more the material support. . . ." To be identified in this way with typographic workmanship of such consummate power and purity was irresistible, and virtually by return mail I asked him for permission to visit him in Aurora. He responded so cordially that Paul Williams and I caught a bus to spend the evening of 4 April at his house. The demonstrations which he there openhandedly gave us of his procedures in imposition, lockup, registration, paper-dampening, inking, and so on, constituted a revelation that over the next months would radically change for the better our own methods of working.

Beneficial as these techniques proved to be, we knew he was offering us something much more munificent: my bread-and-butter letter acknowledged that we had even greater things to learn from his example. But now, at this late date, I have formed a fuller appreciation of how inseparable his methods were from his motivations. Unlike us, he never conceived of his work as the pursuit of a "lost art"; typography never appeared to him as an arcane subject for disinterment, dissection, and possible resuscitation, but on the contrary as a lively presence, impressionable and responsive, proceeding without interruption from Gutenberg up to his own day. Matters that for Paul and me had become inscrutably snarled through the fraying of traditional tutelage Victor addressed with disarming directness, finding the simplest means to achieve the results he wanted. He was thus the least antiquarian of craftsmen. Although he must, for instance, have experimented with leathern balls for applying ink, probably early on in Florence, he never mentioned them to us as in any respect superior to the composition rollers which he used knowing full well that they had emerged from the industrial revolution's dark, satanic mills. If he still cut punches by hand and printed dampened paper on a hand press, that was because he never found

A SHORT EXPLANATION MAY TELL YOU WHAT TO expect from this Uncial type; it will also provide an example of how best to use it.

As in the first days of letter-cutting and printing, so now I have to offer this type-face in one size only. Its range is therefore limited to what some one hundred characters including capitals/small letters/figures and auxiliaries can achieve. But if its qualities are appreciated, it may, within its limits, find happy uses.

I have printed books from this type. My experiences are embodied in certain changes of its form that I believe to be final. There is a certain restriction in setting it: it is not amenable to the prevalent habit of adjusting each line of prose to the same length by changing spaces between words. I cannot here go into the philosophy of what Eric Gill calls *The Procrustean Bed of the Composing Stick*; I can only advise you that the right-hand margin should be left ragged, as the scribes and early printers left it, with only a number of lines on each page adjusted — one of the first three lines should be full measure, with a few full length lines scattered throughout the type block and one or two at the end. A close even texture should be kept also by minimum spacing between words; I have found two points sufficient.

Such advice will not substitute for a sensitive observation of the type-face itself. What virtues it has were not achieved magically, but come direct-

ly from the love and care with which I have cut it. This requires something from you as a printer. You are requested to use it creatively, that is: not for startling effects, but allowing its virtues a straightforward statement in use.

American Uncial is unique in that its origin and production follows the exact procedure of the well known masters, viz., Nicolas Jenson/Claude Garamond/William Caslon or Giambattista Bodoni. The design is a result of some thirty years of study and experimentation by Victor Hammer who also cut the punches by hand in the manner of all the great traditional punch cutters. Since the type is the result of a lifetime study of a distinct phase of letter design, not well known to the contemporary printer, it offers him the opportunity to use a new type with the assurance that it has all the traditional stability and genuineness of the few well known types upon which type design has lived throughout five centuries.

Characters in Complete Font

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

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Copyright 1946/ by Victor Hammer/Aurora/N.Y.

Victor Hammer's specimen sheet for the American Uncial typeface

other methods half so good for making type of the first water and expressing it with complete integrity. Such laborious technics were in themselves by no means sacrosanct or even entirely satisfactory to him—he continually considered possible improvements in iron hand-press construction, even its electric motorization, if that could be done without impairing the product. Subservient to no technology, he worked in the pristine light that Ratdolt and Baskerville had enjoyed.

But of course the world knew that there had been a change. The fascicle of his work that Victor sent us was set in American Uncial, the typeface for which he was just then cutting the last punches. Upon first seeing it, I tried to convey to him my fine, careless rapture with this tirade:

One lesson about type that is everywhere taught and that must be unlearned by any serious printer is the following: a typeface, or a printed page, must be unobtrusive, a transparency through which one looks at the "real thing," whatever that is. I suppose the "real thing" is that same beyond-the-horizon quality that all secular, liberal, pragmatic minds must seek; for, strangely enough, in an unreligious frame everything without exception becomes a means and the goal is nowhere apparent. It is this kind of thinking that moves Stanley Morison in his little primer of typography. It is part of the mechanization, secularization of the world. Because you work *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* and so perceive that the universe is not simply a process within a process of becoming, you have a great advantage. But that advantage is not S. Morison's kind; it would not make you popular today. I showed your printing to a friend. His objection was made immediately and unequivocally, before he'd even had time to look: the type is "queer." Well, habit is strong and almost always bad, but it is not invincible. Your work is, I know, uphill; but who would choose to work at dead-level or on the down-grade, as most men do?

Such rash enthusiasm became difficult to sustain in the teeth of the world's opposition and with intentions less resolute and tried and true than the punchcutter's own. But it was straightway effective for achieving one commendable result. The philosopher James Feibleman of New Orleans had submitted to us a meditative poem

in seventy Spenserian stanzas; and although not seeking vanity publication, he offered to defray production costs of the book. We persuaded him to allow us to use his offering to have the work done at Aurora in American Uncial. So it was hand printed there, with Jacob Hammer as compositor and pressman under his father's supervision, which had to be administered part of the time from the hospital bed where Victor was confined after suffering a heart attack. *Journey to the Coastal Marsh*, as the book they produced is entitled, must surely rank among the typographic triumphs of 1946 or any other year, even though the American Institute of Graphic Arts scandalized me by rejecting it for the Fifty Books exhibition.

At this very time, American Uncial was being cast in Chicago, and Victor made a font of it available to us. As soon as the type had arrived and been laid in cases, we began to set it for a Christmas folder of passages from the Messianic prophecies. Aspiring to pay the face homage, we dressed it somewhat elaborately, with hairline rules in sober blue between all lines and a modicum of printed rubrication as well. With some trepidation we sent an early copy to Victor before the ink was completely dry. When he saw what we had done, he wrote:

I find myself in an awkward position: trying to describe in words what probably cannot be conveyed in words. Nevertheless I shall attempt the impossible. Your Messiah: My first and still persisting impression is that you did not put the type to "straightforward use," you misused it. Not intentionally of course. Your idea of the lines [rules] may have had its origin either in a recollection of something similar you have seen or you may have figured it out. It seems a brainchild anyhow. Still, even so you could have worked it out with your eyes. The criterion in this case is a feeling somewhere inside you, a sense or feeling of equilibrium. When looking at your proof, this something, located in the middle of your being, solar plexus or diaphragm, tells you directly whether or not what you see or look at (judge) has equilibrium. If you don't feel it you are not a craftsman. You may be able to develop it, but no other criterion is valid. Equilibrium in this case means equilibrium between page, type, white space between the lines. This is clearly not the case. The distance between the lines ought to be at least 6-point wider. If this is not compatible with the

text, then you cannot use the lines . . . —The other question . . . is whether it is good or bad taste. But even bad taste can be tolerated where a “visual” solution is achieved. For instance: Illuminated mspts of the 15 century are not any more in as good taste as mspts of the 10th. . . . But the 15 century mspts are still solved “visually,” through that power of discernment of the craftsman. That is why apprenticeship is the only good educational method in the crafts. People who cannot develop the discernment by way of the solar plexus or diaphragm are kicked out of the shop.—For the same reason all criticism belongs to the workshop and not outside of it. Aesthetics are developed outside the workshop, by people who have not learned to mould and shape so long until it is right: Right = equilibrium. It isn’t the eye alone that acts, it’s the whole man.

Well, both of us survived this exchange of blows, he mine to his eye and I his to my midriff. Much later, when I had stopped wincing and feinting in self-defense, the painful lesson could be phrased in my own terms: virtue in typography always originates from a proportional formation of its essential elements—letters, words, ink, and paper—into a coherent presence directly manifest to physical perception, never from the willful imposition of decorative devices no matter how ingenious. The birth of the Messiah does not require any obtrusive reference to antecedent glory.

By the next spring, we had recovered sufficiently to begin setting American Uncial for a book, *The Good European*, by R.P. Blackmur. After considerable delay while the poet kept his proofs overtime in order to accustom himself to the face, we circumspectly sent a proof of the first signature to Victor, who promptly responded that he found the sheet “pleasing except for the hard paper” and expressed a few detailed criticisms of it nonverbally, on two attractive leaves of annotated thumbnail sketches. (His handsome running hand, the basis of the Uncial type’s letterforms, retained its temper and clarity in pencil as well as pen, and when written on his lap in hospital as well as formally rendered at a desk, and during his seventy-eighth year as well as his sixty-third.) He delineated for our consideration some problems of imposition, spacing words in all capitals, run-over verses, and most emphatically the placement of its first line below the normal head

of the type-page form: "The empty space on top of a page is always arbitrarily chosen, consequently gives the feeling of uncertainty." I was still tender enough to be wary and even, I guess, a little scared of such overpowering authority, and answered his gentle objections glibly; just one of the points I made may have been well taken: "Lines should be run over as arbitrarily, as obviously as possible, i.e. not at the caesura but preferably after an unstressed syllable. Then a reader will certainly not confuse the poet's intention with the printer's, as he might if the visual break coincided with an audible one." And so we went to press without any extensive revision of the format. The binding was finished by November, and when he had received a copy, Victor wrote:

Thank you for the book, which pleases me very much. I am particularly happy that it is so different from what I would have made and still is very harmonious, strong and even beautiful. This book confirmed my opinion that the type is still in its heroic epoch. The openness of the title pages is a remnant of the immediate past, but that usage will change, I am sure.—The next mutation of the type can only come through a clear and definite reaction from that part of the public to whom it appeals, foremost to the poets themselves.

The Good European was chosen for the Fifty Books exhibition, an honor which, though somewhat stained by our remembrance of how *Journey to the Coastal Marsh* had fared the year before, nevertheless proved American Uncial to be not wholly unacceptable to at least some small part of the bibliophilic public. A contrary reaction came from a poet, however: Randall Jarrell's review in *The New Republic* complained that we had done readers a disservice by printing Blackmur's "troubling, difficult, and serious poems . . . in an extraordinary type one has almost to learn to read." His rebuke cannot be the sole reason that we used the Uncial type so seldom thereafter, in only two other publications, I believe, both of them pamphlets. Indeed, our immediate reaction to Jarrell's disparagement was a defiant resolve to promote the face by setting every compatible text possible in it, and we had a particular one at hand, a long invective by Robert Lowell entitled *Dead Briton's Vision*.

In late May 1947 Victor finally came to Cummington to see us, and his presence excited us to a frenzy of plans and phantasms: his

Wells College appointment would terminate the next year, and Paul and I could sense that our own position was scarcely more tenable; so we dreamed up a way to cast our uncertain futures together by establishing a school of the arts of the book modeled more or less on Rudolf Koch's group in Germany, all instruction to be given through apprenticeships. The idea still seems to me more than mere moonshine, but we conceived it during the decade of interregnum in the patronage system, public support not as yet having succeeded defunct private resources, and we never found out how to get such a project funded. Our ebullience had not entirely subsided even by the next September, when we spent a day with Victor in Aurora, and eventually two things of consequence for Paul and me did transpire from it. One of them was a correctly rigged replacement for our old hand press, which when he looked it over Victor had declared to be incorrigible. The other was an engagement to print a book at the Wells College Press the following spring just before he was due to leave it. Neither project worked out exactly as we would have wished.

Our struggles with the monstrous new press have already been recounted elsewhere. The sojourn at Aurora-on-Cayuga was even more disappointing. By the time we arrived there Victor was fully occupied with preparations for his move to Lexington, Kentucky, where he had found a haven at Transylvania College, and far from working with him in close collaboration, we saw very little of him. He left us alone also, I suspect, out of scrupulous concern that we be granted full autonomy in the fulfillment of our assignment. But by then our faith in the prospect of our assuming responsibility for the Wells College Press after his departure was beginning to falter, and so I think was that of the supervisory committee who had at his behest arranged for our trial run there. Furthermore, the book we had originally planned to print proved to be impracticable: some question was raised whether *Dead Briton's Vision* were not a text too scurrilous for the college's sponsorship; and we found no American Uncial in the composing room, as we had thought we should, and under the circumstances could hardly ask Victor to lend us the use of his own font. So we substituted a manuscript of poems by William Carlos Williams, later entitled *The Clouds, Aigeltinger, Russia, &c.*, for which the one type the college did possess, Joseph Blumenthal's Spiral, was not unsuitable. The book was a long one to set up in a face new to us and print on an unaccustomed press within the allotted period of three months; we

kept our noses to the grindstone, but even so did not have time to incorporate a woodcut that Paul had drawn for the frontispiece. The volume finally published is notable chiefly for its binding, executed less hurriedly by Peter Franck some distance away.

After he was gone from that part of the country and we had to envisage a future devoid of his close association, our sorrow blinded us to the inexhaustible treasure Victor had left in our care. It seemed to us then that through our poverty and ineptitude we had missed a supreme chance to secure the alliance in which our aspirations could mature most happily and his mastery maintain itself in fullest power. When the institutions of this world rejected our grandiose appeal, we had responded with a scheme for founding yet another institution to countermand them, and despaired when that likewise failed in turn. Our self-important busyness prevented us from pausing to consider Victor's patience, which if we had paid attention was telling us that the work itself is what matters and when it is authentic, the conditions of its accomplishment will necessarily be adverse. Within four months after his trek to new territory, he had resumed printing his quarto edition of Hölderlin's poems in American Uncial. Still under physicians' care, he modified his iron hand press by lopping a quarter of its platen off either end, so that he could strike the four-page form with two pulls, as had been the practice on wooden common presses—an expedient which allowed him to do all the work by himself without undue bodily strain. He wrote us about an additional advantage he found in this alteration:

Since I am working alone, thanks to the halved platen . . . I have learned how to print. That is to say I know how the sheets will look like and they do look exactly as I want them. To me the secret is: working alone. No movement is wasted, no word uttered, complete concentration which shows up in the work itself.

Of course this was good news, but for us it contained a lesson as painful in its way as his criticism of the Messiah folder had been: we missed him so much that we still wished he might call on us for assistance. Not until later, when he had bound and presented to us a "waste copy" of the book and we recognized how superlative a masterpiece he had wrought, could we wholeheartedly, with no reservation whatsoever, rejoice in his independent well-being. And

with our regard for him liberated at last from willful self-seeking, we began to appreciate the true value of what he had already given us.

Such courageous, resourceful, devoted patience as he possessed is assuredly an infusion of special grace; but little as I know about the circumstances of his life before he immigrated to America, I imagine they must have inculcated the virtue. On one occasion he intimated that he had come from peasant stock, and in a letter explaining his manner of painting declared his temperament to be that of a townsman:

I was born, or set into the city of the 17 century (not too bad a time for one whose life is seeing): Vienna of the time of Maria Teresa. Since nobody told me that this was the past, it was presence for me . . . at the time when my mind was moulded. I am still in this presence, how can I ever perceive of living in the 20th century? Not while I work. There is nothing new and nothing old for which I would strive or . . . would abhor. I am still playing in a real city, not in the country. A tree is in the foreground for a building, if there is or must be a tree.

These disclosures tended to confirm a conclusion I had drawn intuitively early in our acquaintance: he was a man who embodied a culture still harmoniously whole, in whom the essential values of the classic and medieval West abided intact and salutary. Paradoxically perhaps, this inner coherence proved advantageous to a displaced person in our violently fragmented time: it gave Victor the power of decision by which his deft escape from the Nazis had been effected, and in exile it helped him to preserve an integrity which strange situations and customs could not despoil. And it was especially felicitous for him as artist, making possible works of such profound originality that by comparison much of the avant-garde looks commonplace and fainthearted; for he never worked to explore and exploit his own psyche, but impersonally, to the greater glory of God and in service to a public which, through a perfidious mischance of history, was either no longer or not yet there. He wrote us:

I am still eager to create, but not to convince. For many years I was not sure whether my Uncial is not stillborn, because nearly everybody thought I am a crank. Hofmannsthal used

to say to others, as I learned later on: Hammer is such a nice fellow but when he starts talking about his type I simply cannot follow. As a painter I am perfectly and thoroughly laid off, like Cézanne in his time, only he never was a success whereas I was.

We have yet to find a full and proper response to his handiwork, whether in typography or painting or architecture or critical theory, and probably we never shall until we have become an audience as self-possessed, as wholly in equilibrium as he was and they remain.

*This reminiscence of master printer Victor Hammer was part of the program of the Fifth Seminar in Graphic Design at The King Library Press, University of Kentucky, October 1981.